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# U.S. Commitment to Human Rights

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COMPLETED

*Following is a statement by Walter J. Stoessel, Jr., Under Secretary for Political Affairs, before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on July 14, 1981.*

Under this Administration, the protection and enhancement of human rights is a principal goal of our foreign policy. Indeed, it shapes the fundamental purposes and helps define the context of our international relationships. This commitment to human rights, like our entire foreign policy, is an expression of values deeply held by the American people themselves. In the debate over how best to pursue human rights, we should not lose sight of the broad consensus that exists about most human rights issues. It is recognized the world over that America, as a nation, is in the forefront in the struggle to advance human rights. Americans object to violations of human rights wherever they occur. We believe that human rights practices are an important factor in our relations with other countries, and we Americans believe that when things are wrong, they should be set right—that is our duty to help. Our law and our policy reflect these deep feelings and draw strength and inspiration from them.

As the spokesman for the American people, this Administration opposes the violation of human rights whether by ally or adversary, friend or foe. Ours is not a policy of "selective indignation." Rather, it is one of balanced and even-handed condemnation of human rights violations wherever they occur. Secretary Haig has outlined the main tenets of this Administration's foreign policy:

- Our emphasis on defending U.S. national security;
- Our determination to work closely with our allies and friends and to strengthen our alliances;
- Our dedication to improving our relations with developing countries; and
- The President's economic program which is transforming and revitalizing the nation's economy and providing the material basis for a sound foreign policy.

Our commitment to human rights is fundamental. It is an integral element of this Administration's foreign policy, which must be considered along with—not against—these other factors in making particular foreign policy decisions. Just as the consideration of human rights should not be a mere afterthought in the foreign policy process, neither should it be isolated and pursued as if it were the only goal in our relations with other countries. We believe that human rights are not only compatible with our national interest; they are an indispensable element of the American approach—at home and abroad. Our objective is to make our security interests and our human rights concerns mutually reinforcing so that they can be pursued in tandem.

U.S. human rights policy also should be directed toward attaining real results. It should utilize the approaches most likely to attain a real improvement in human rights. It should be effective. This has usually been the American approach, one of effective pragmatism. In pursuing this course, we recognize that the countries of the world vary tremendously in political, economic, and cultural terms, representing a diverse inheritance of historical traditions and contemporary circumstances. We need, in the 1980s, the sophistication to apply our instruments of influence in ways that correspond to—and respect—the complex international system, while working to move all countries to show greater respect for the internationally agreed standards of human rights. Our task is to translate these agreements into reality.

The United States has a number of instruments with which we can—and will—promote human rights. If the United States is to show leadership in the cause of human rights, we must lead in the first instance by our own example. This is a precondition for success. We need to be an example to other nations—both of strength and prosperity—and of our vibrant democratic institutions. For we cannot call on others to meet high human rights standards unless we do so ourselves. President Reagan has captured this concept clearly in speaking of the United States as a city upon a hill. We have much to be proud of in this regard.

We must match our commitment to principle with strong political resolve. Our influence on human rights can extend only as far as our reputation for reliability to friends and allies and the respect we generate from our adversaries. This Administration will meet these preconditions for a successful human rights policy.

We believe that the use of traditional diplomacy is generally more effective than other approaches and is more likely to lead to results. Traditional diplomacy has always combined public and private aspects but with greater reliance on private approaches because of their flexibility and precision and because they avoid injury to the dignity of sovereign states. If we want other governments to curb human rights abuses in their countries we should speak to them privately first and in ways which do not threaten them with public loss of face, which often leads only to obstinacy. We should speak to them, where possible, in the framework of friendly relations grounded in trust and reciprocity.

In a large number of countries in all areas of the world we are undertaking vigorous diplomatic interventions, both to remind governments of our continued concern about general human rights conditions and to seek relief for particular victims. We have done the latter with governments whose relationships with us are very diverse. But in pursuing this diplomacy, it is particularly important to avoid any attitude that seems patronizing or arrogant.

While private diplomacy will be the preferred approach of this Adminstration, it is, of course, vital not to forget that public expressions of concern can also be a useful instrument of human rights policy. We will continue to use this instrument where it is needed. As one example, the Administration was pleased to be able recently to contribute $1.5 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in support of its program for protecting and assisting political detainees in many countries. This was the first U.S. contribution, in response to an appeal which ICRC made in early 1980. The program is a valuable means of providing support to political prisoners through neutral channels and also is consonant with the Administration's intention to heighten international consciousness of human rights problems.

We will never be in the position of seeming, through silence, to renounce what America stands for. But in using diplomacy to raise the world's consciousness of human rights, we will avoid unproductive posturing that could complicate real progress.

Two current examples of our public human rights diplomacy are the Administration's approach to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the 37th session of the U.N. Human Rights Commission.

- At Madrid the U.S. delegation has eloquently upheld the banner of human rights, while throwing full light on violations by the Soviet Union and some East European states, and pressing hard for positive steps which will assist in the protection of human rights.
- At the U.N. Human Rights Commission meeting, which opened barely 2 weeks after the inauguration, we emphasized the continued U.S. interest in human rights. The major achievement was the commission's adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Also noteworthy were the resolutions condeming Soviet activities in Afghanistan and human rights violations in Kampuchea.

In those instances where nothing else is or will be effective and where there remains a need to make our position unequivocally clear to preserve international standards, we will be prepared to deal with human rights violations with the various diplomatic and economic measures available to us.

Finally, to encourage a better world climate for human rights, we are attempting to strengthen adherence to international legal standards whenever possible. The international sense of what is permissible and impermissible can be highly beneficial to the suffering people around the world. We do not nurture this international sense of acceptable behavior if we respond weakly to outrages against our citizens and diplomats or fail to defend our rights. For this reason, we have declared we will not negotiate with hostage takers, and we have begun a serious program to counter international terrorism which perpetrates some of the cruelest violations of human rights.

In dealing with specific human rights problems, we will be applying a number of common sense criteria. These will include:

- We should act in ways that are most likely to improve actual human rights conditions. This is our most important principle.
- At the same time, we should consider the absolute as well as the relative human rights conditions. There can be cases where human rights violations are so extreme that even improved conditions should not make us change our attitude.
- Trends are important. Improvements—as well as deterioration in past performance—should be weighed carefully.
- In a few cases we must take a stand even if it will have no immediate effect. In a case like the Kampuchean genocide we must speak out simply to maintain our conception of decency and to preserve the shreds of international consensus on human rights standards.
- When we decide on an action promoting a right or remedying a violation, we must weigh the importance of the particular human rights involved. Torture and physical abuse are especially abhorrent. We also attach particular importance to promotion of political rights.
- We also realize that there are differences in the universality with which we can secure various rights. Some rights can easily be instituted everywhere, given good will; others require complex preconditions. It follows that we demand the first category more universally than the second. Some parts of the world have longer and deeper traditions of respect for human rights.

There is, of course, no general formula for how we weigh the criteria with one another in all parts of the world, and these criteria are only illustrative. Moreover, human rights considerations will be weighed with other foreign policy concerns. In short, we must decide human rights issues on a case-by-case basis, but in the light of American principles. We are developing our criteria in light of experience and welcome this opportunity to gain the wisdom of the committee on this subject.

To conclude, in making decisions on human rights policy we are likely to confront many dilemmas. We will face many difficult cases, and it will be hard to be sure that we have made the right decision; sometimes we may err, but, if we are guided by our principles and learn from our experience, we will refine our judgments as we proceed. We will move closer to our goal of serving human rights and our national interest, of living in a world that is both safer and more just. ■

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